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ABSTRACT

Current research in reading indicates that what the reader brings to the printed page is far more important to comprehension than the information appearing there. This paper presents a model of how the integration of reading and writing skills can be undertaken, thereby strengthening both skill areas. With selections from a literary text and a content-area text, two examples of the model in operation are given. Each selection is broken down into its component kernel sentences, and students are asked to combine the kernels into sentences and the sentences into one or more paragraphs. Next, the students' paragraphs are shared, and the alternative patterns discussed and compared. Finally, the students are given the original text; they may criticize or support the author's choices, making their judgments as informed readers and writers who have grappled with the same content. The goal is to make students aware of the processing steps required in reading particular syntactic structures and to make these processes more automatic and efficient. (CC)

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DEVELOPING SYNTACTIC FLUENCY IN THE READING PROCESS

Current research in the reading process had led to the conclusion that what the reader brings to the printed page is far more important for comprehension than the information that appears on the printed page. That is, the reader's previous experiences, knowledge and attitude significantly influence his ability to interact meaningfully with the material being presented to him. As classroom teachers and as readers ourselves, we are all aware of the advantage which prior knowledge in a given area gives us when we are exposed to new information. We are able to "plug" this new knowledge into a conceptual framework which we already possess, or as Frank Smith suggests, we can rearrange our cognitive categories to allow this new material to be incorporated.[1] That prior knowledge can be experiential or it can be related to familiarity with the three aspects of the reading process identified in current psycholinguistic research, graphic-phonemic similarities, syntactic processing and semantic processing.

In addition to exprience with actual content as background that relates to the material being presented on the printed page, we as teachers have had a greater experience with a variety of syntactic structures that we produce as writers and process as readers than our students have had. In an earlier article,[2] I pointed out that there appears to be considerable evidence that complex syntactic structures are more difficult to process for readers than simpler ones. For example, the inclusion of modification between a subject and its verb requires the reader to hold the subject in mind until he is able

CS203 870

to link it up with its appropriate verb. Analysis of various syntactic structures through the application of syntactic complexity formulas[3] is a way of beginning to assess relative complexities of these structures to help classroom teachers evaluate texts from that perspective when they are choosing appropriate materials for their students. At the present time, formulas of this type are more readily applied to beginning level reading materials and require further development before they can account for many of the syntactic complexities found in adult-level texts. (There is also an urgent need to incorporate into this analysis an evaluation of semantic complexities.)

It is apparent that classroom teachers, particularly English teachers, have to be able to assist their students with the reading not only of essays and literary materials from their own courses, but other content area texts which the students are required to use in their other courses. I believe that English teachers can justify providing their students with these necessary reading experiences even in a class labelled "composition class" through an integration of reading and writing skills that will strengthen both. Mina Shaughnessy has pointed out that students "often complain about the gap between the 'easy' sentences in their workbooks and the complicated ones they encounter in reading or that they generate in their writing, sentences they seem to need in order to express their meaning or pursue their thoughts but sentences that are difficult to manage without more experience with writing."[4]

I should like then to provide a model of how this integration of skills can be undertaken and then discuss two examples of the model in operation, one with a selection from a literary text and one with a selection from a content-area text. The procedure will be the same in both cases. A selection will be chosen and then each sentence will be broken down into its component kernel sentences. (Kernel sentence will be defined as base clause with single

adjective and/or prepositional phrase modifiers.[5] This adjustment from the "traditional" definition of kernel sentence is made so that students will not have sets of kernels that are cumbersome and unworkable for them.) The students would be given the sets of kernels only, grouped by sentences, and asked to combine each group of kernels into one sentence, the sentences then being grouped into one or more paragraphs. (It would probably be best to provide only one paragraph of a text at least at the beginning.)

The students would be asked to share, first, individual sentences and then later, complete paragraphs. As in other sentence-combining activities, the alternative patterns would be discussed and compared. But in addition to talking about the stylistic differences created by the writers, the students would also be asked to compare the different effects in the readers caused by the choices of patterns. For example, the inclusion of full relative clauses instead of reduction to single modifiers might slow down the processing of a particular sentence or group of sentences. Students would be asked to consider whether or not this is desirable for this particular selection. Would they say that this kind of structure is appropriate for a narrative? for a description? for exposition? If subordination is used in the combining process, as Shaughnessy points out, the writer is involved in a complex process even as he is preparing material for a reader:

> If the dependent unit comes first in the sentence, the writer must suspend the independent unit in his mind while he qualifies it (as with introductory adverbial phrases and clauses). If the dependent unit comes between the subject and predicate of the base sentence (as with a relative clause after the subject), the writer must hold the main subject in his mind while he writes out the subject and predicate of the qualifying clause, and then he must return to the predicate of the base sentence.[6]

Shaughnessy states then that these operations require a memory for written

words and grammatical structures that the inexperienced writer may not have. But through the model suggested here, the writer would not have this memory load to contend with since the content for the syntactical operations would be provided. This approach would follow the recommendations made in Herber's Instructional Framework[7] and, instead of using assumptive teaching--requiring the students to handle both memory load and syntactical operations simultaneously--the problem of content could be mitigated through the material provided and the focus placed entirely on the syntactic processing and its effects.

Patterns within the larger discourse unit would also be explored. Questions about variety of structures and length of individual sentences within a paragraph (e.g. alternation of short and long sentences) would be considered. Amount and placement of modification, the use of pronoun referents and transitional devices could also be examined.

After two or three alternative "writings" of this selection by different students have been analyzed and compared, the students would be provided with the text as written by the author. Similarities and differences between their versions and the author's could then be examined critically. The students would see where the author accepted or rejected patterns which they had suggested. They would become alert to the fact that particular authors seem to prefer particular structures and transformations, as Ohmann[8] has pointed out, even though this technical language need never be introduced into the classroom.

As students examine a variety of material, written by different authors for different purposes, they can become more tolerant of stylistic idiosyncrasies and become aware of the fact that they should expect certain types of language structures in the various texts they will read. As Goodman[9]

has pointed out in a somewhat different context, they can become better predictors of what they will find in a piece of written material, at least insofar as complexity of syntactic structures is concerned.

I do not wish in any way to suggest that increased competence in the handling of syntactic processes will be a complete answer to the reading difficulties which students have. But as one of the three basic processes identified by psycholinguists working in the field of reading, increased competency with syntactic structures will contribute to increased fluency in reading.

Here, then, are two examples of this process in operation. The first selection is taken from James Baldwin's Notes of a Native Son.[10] Students would be provided with this set of kernels and asked to combine them into sentences and then into a paragraph:

1 My father died.
He died on July 29th.
He died in 1943.

2 His last child was born on the same day.
His last child was born a few hours later.

3 One of the boodiest race riots of the century had been in Detroit.
The race riots had been over a month before this.
All our energies were concentrated.
We were waiting for these events.

4 A race riot broke out in Harlem.
The riot broke out a few hours after my father's funeral.
My father lay in state in the undertaker's chapel.

5 We drove my father to the graveyard.
We drove through a wilderness.
The wilderness was of smashed plate glass.
We drove on the morning of August 3rd.

Students should be told that in combining kernels for individual sentences and sentences into paragraphs, they may omit repetitive words, provide transitions, substitute pronouns and alter orderings of elements within a sentence. They should decide on an effect which they wish to create for a reader and

then work to produce a style which will create that effect. After discussion of the proposed paragraphs, the original paragraph written by Baldwin should be distributed to them:

> On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born. Over a month before this, while all our energies were concentrated in waiting for these events, there had been, in Detroit, one of the bloodiest race riots of the century. A few hours after my father's funeral, while he lay in state in the undertaker's chapel, a race riot broke out in Harlem. On the morning of the 3rd of August, we drove my father to the graveyard through a wilderness of smashed plate glass.

A few stylistic features of this brief selection should be readily evident to the students. In <u>each</u> of the five sentences of this paragraph, some modifier or group of modifiers introduces the sentence before the subject is presented. Sentences 2 and 3 both contain pronoun references, each having a referent in its preceding sentence ("his" in sentence 2 referring to "my father" in sentence 1 and "this" in sentence 3 subsuming the ideas "my father died" and "his last child was born" in sentence 2). The effect of the modification in all five sentences prior to the announcement of the subject is to slow down the reader, to allow him to enter into Baldwin's world slowly and thoughtfully. But while this is happening, <u>the reader is being slowed down</u>; he must be patient enough to wait for the subject of each sentence to be introduced; he must be aware that he is going to be required to link up this modification with an as yet unrevealed subject.

Although this particular paragraph represents an extreme example of an author preferring a particular stylistic structure, addition before the main clause in Christensen's terms,[11] (and is not totally representative of Baldwin's style,) it does provide a dramatic insight into the effect that stylistic choice has on a reader's experience with a given author and a given type of narrative writing. The students may wish to support or to

criticize Baldwin's choices, but in any case, they will be making these judgments as informed readers and writers who had to grapple with the same content. They directly experienced the manipulation of syntax and thus are conscious of the decisions involved in these manipulations.

There is no desire here to slow down the fluent reader whose expertise with syntactic structures is sufficient for his reading tasks. The desire is to make the less fluent reader aware of the processing steps that will be required of him in reading particular syntactic structures and to make these processes more automatic and efficient for him so that he, like the more fluent reader, will soon be able to virtually ignore them as he processes written language to extract meaning. In appropriate circumstances, he can come to appreciate poetic style as explicated by Britton[12] and work on learning to produce it.

Syntactic structures can also be examined with a selection from a content-area text. The following passage which was prepared for analysis was taken from an introductory psychology textbook:[13]

1 The immediate family is a miniature society.
The child has his first contacts in a miniature society.
The contacts are with other people.

2 These social experiences condition the child.
The experiences are early.
The child expects certain things.
The child behaves in certain ways.
The child goes out into the larger society.

3 A feeling of security or insecurity will tend to generalize to other social situations.
The feeling is acquired in the family situation.

4 Thus, the child will feel more secure than (another child will feel secure).
Someone loves the child.
Someone understands the child at home.
The security will be felt more outside the home.
Someone (else) rejected the (other) child at home.

After these kernels have been combined in various ways and discussed at the sentence and discourse levels, the students will be given copies of the original text selection:

> The immediate family is a miniature society in which the child has his first contacts with other people. These early social experiences in the family condition the child to expect certain things and to behave in certain ways when he goes out into the larger society. A feeling of security or insecurity acquired in the family situation will tend to generalize to other social situations. Thus, the child who is loved and understood at home will feel more secure outside the home than will the child who is rejected at home.

Several stylistic features of this passage are noteworthy. Each sentence begins with the noun phrase subject. Only sentence 4 has a delayed subject at all and even then the sentence begins with a transitional item, "thus," which is followed directly by the subject. Sentences 2,3 and 4 all have modification intervening between the subject and verb, prepositional phrases in sentences 2 and 3 and a clause in sentence 4. There are four dependent clause constructions in these four sentences and three infinitive phrases. This contrasts with two dependent clauses in the five sentences taken from the Baldwin passage and no infinitive phrases. There are also three passive constructions in the psychology text selection compared with one in the Baldwin selection.

Some characteristic differences between the narrative and expository passages can begin to be seen even from this brief an examination. Analysis of further passages will demonstrate these and other types of differences to students even more clearly.

Again, it is important to emphasize that syntactic complexity is only one element of readability, but one that deserves some consideration on the part of both readers and writers. Through an examination of stylistic alternatives for particular types of writing, students can come to see what

expectations of syntactic processing are reasonable for them and move toward greater syntactic fluency. Then they will be able to focus more directly on their ultimate objective, the extraction of meaning from the written material before them.

FOOTNOTES

1 Frank Smith, Understanding Reading (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971).

2 Marilyn S. Sternglass, "Composition Teacher as Reading Teacher," College Composition and Communication, 27 (December, 1976).

3 M. Botel, J. Dawkins and A. Granowsky, "A Syntactic Complexity Formula," in W.H. MacGinitie (Ed.), Assessment Problems in Reading (Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1973), pp. 77-86.

4 Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.51.

5 This definition was arrived at after consultation with Harold Nugent whose assistance with this and the analysis of the kernel sentences is gratefully acknowledged.

6 Ibid., pp. 58-59.

7 Harold L. Herber, Teaching Reading in Content Areas (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), pp. 28-52.

8 Richard Ohmann, "Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style," Word, 20 (December, 1965), pp. 423-439; "Literature as Sentences," College English, 27 (January, 1966), pp. 261-267.

9 Kenneth Goodman, "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game," Journal of the Reading Specialist, 4 (May, 1967), pp. 126-135.

10 James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

11 Francis Christensen, Notes Toward A New Rhetoric (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

12 James Britton et al, The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) (London: Macmillan Education, Ltd., 1975).

13 Lewis R. Aiken, Jr., General Psychology: A Survey (Scranton, Pa.: Chandler Publishing Co., 1969), p. 97.